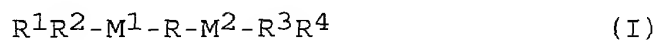


WE CLAIM:

1. A process for preparing a 5-cyanovaleric acid or its ester comprising reacting pentenenitrile with carbon monoxide and water and/or an alcohol in the presence of a catalyst system, comprising

- (a) a source of Group VIII metal and
- (b) a bidentate phosphine, arsine and/or stibine ligand, wherein the bidentate ligand has the general formula (I):



wherein M^1 and M^2 are independently P, As or Sb, R is a divalent organic bridging group, which bridging group comprises a chain of 3 to 5 atoms directly connecting the 2 phosphorus atoms, which chain consists of carbon atoms and optionally a nitrogen, oxygen or sulphur atom or a silano or dialkylsilicon group, which alkyl groups independently comprise from 1 to 4 carbon atoms, and R^1-R^4 represent the same or different optionally substituted tertiary alkyl groups,

- (c) an acid having a pKa less than 3, as measured at 18 °C in an aqueous solution.

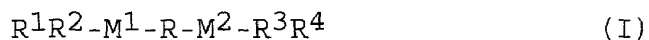
2. The process of claim 1 wherein the bidentate ligand of formula (I) is a bisphosphine ligand and R^1-R^4 represent the same tertiary alkyl groups.

3. The process of claim 1 wherein R^1-R^4 represent tertiary butyl groups.

4. The process of claim 1 wherein R is a C_3-C_5 alkylene group.

5. The process of claim 4 wherein the bidentate ligand is 1,3-bis(di-tert.butylphosphino)propane or 1,2-bis(di-tert.butylphosphinomethyl)benzene.
6. The process of claim 1 wherein the Group VIII metal is palladium.
7. The process of claim 4 wherein the Group VIII metal is palladium.
8. The process of claim 1 wherein the molar ratio between the ligand (b) and the metal (a) is in the range of 1:1 to 5:1.
9. The process of claim 8 wherein the Group VIII metal is palladium.
10. The process of claim 1 wherein the reaction is carried out at a temperature in the range of about 80 to about 125 °C.
11. The process of claim 4 wherein the reaction is carried out at a temperature in the range of about 80 to about 125 °C.
12. The process of claim 6 wherein the reaction is carried out at a temperature in the range of about 80 to about 125 °C.
13. The process of claim 1 wherein the molar ratio of acid compound (c) and metal (a) is between 1:1 and 5:1.
14. A process for preparing ϵ -caprolactam comprising:
 - (i) reacting pentenenitrile with carbon monoxide and water and/or an alcohol in the presence of a catalyst system, comprising
 - (a) a source of Group VIII metal,

- (b) a bidentate phosphine, arsine and/or stibine ligand, wherein the bidentate ligand has the general formula (I):



wherein M^1 and M^2 are independently P, As or Sb, R is a divalent organic bridging group, which bridging group comprises a chain of 3 to 5 atoms directly connecting the 2 phosphorus atoms, which chain consists of carbon atoms and optionally a nitrogen, oxygen or sulphur atom or a silano or dialkylsilicon group, which alkyl groups independently comprise from 1 to 4 carbon atoms, and R^1-R^4 represent the same or different optionally substituted tertiary alkyl groups, and

(c) an acid having a pKa less than 3, as measured at 18 °C in an aqueous solution thereby producing 5-cyanovaleric acid or ester,

thereby producing 5-cyanovaleric acid or ester;

(ii) reducing the 5-cyanovaleric acid or ester to provide 6-aminocaproic acid or ester, and

(iii) cyclising the 6-aminocaproic acid or ester to provide ϵ -caprolactam.

15. The process of claim 14 wherein a mixture of branched and linear carbonylation products as obtained in step (i) is used in step (ii) and/or (iii).

16. The process of claim 14 wherein the bidentate ligand of formula (I) is a bisphosphine ligand and R^1-R^4 represent the same tertiary alkyl groups.

17. The process of claim 14 wherein R^1-R^4 represent tertiary butyl groups.

18. The process of claim 14 wherein R is a C₃-C₅ alkylene group.
19. The process of claim 18 wherein the bidentate ligand is 1,3-bis(di-tert.butylphosphino)propane or 1,2-bis(di-tert.butylphosphinomethyl)benzene.
20. The process of claim 14 wherein the Group VIII metal is palladium.
21. The process of claim 18 wherein the Group VIII metal is palladium.
22. The process of claim 14 wherein the molar ratio between the ligand (b) and the metal (a) is in the range of 1:1 to 5:1.
23. The process of claim 14 wherein the reaction is carried out at a temperature in the range of about 80 to about 125 °C.